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Rupture in Kiev: Ukrainians Vote for Change to Consolidate Their Democracy

by Cristina Gherasimov

The landslide victory of Volodymyr Zelenskiy in Ukraine's presidential runoff is a breakthrough in the post-Soviet space that rarely offers chances to political novices. The vote highlights Ukrainians' discontent with the political establishment. It shows a new set of factors at work in shaping the polls, and civil society's readiness to accept risk to consolidate their fragile democracy. For the European Union and Germany, the change offers an opportunity for new momentum in relations with Ukraine.

In one of the most vibrant and unpredictable electoral contests in Ukrainian history, Volodymyr Zelenskiy won the presidential runoff by a landslide with 73.22 percent of votes, thus becoming the sixth president of Ukraine. Never before in Ukrainian history has a presidential candidate won in all but one region (Lviv) across the country. His victory signals a dynamic civil society which is ready to take on risks and endure more change to consolidate its fragile democracy. It is important to understand what caused this voter cohesion and mobilization, and what it means for Ukraine, the post-Soviet space, and the international community more broadly.

To do so adequately requires, at first, an understanding of the significance of the vote at this point in Ukraine's development. 2019 is a special year for Ukrainians: It hosts a double electoral race, for the presidency this spring and for parliament later this autumn. The presidential runoff completed the first electoral cycle after the 2013-14 Euromaidan – a social upheaval, also called the Revolution of Dignity, which enshrined Ukraine's popular choice to be part of the European Union one day. The election also marks five years since Russia occupied Ukraine's Crimea and since the war against Russia-backed forces in eastern Ukraine's Donbas region started. Ensuring that

citizens can cast their votes in free and fair elections and that the transition of power takes place peacefully in such a difficult geopolitical context represented legitimate concerns throughout this campaign, both for the Ukrainian government and the international community.

To understand the degree of change the new president could bring, it is also important to realize just how deeply Ukraine's domestic reform agenda and its foreign policy are intertwined. Under Ukraine's political system, the two key policies in the president's purview are foreign policy and defense; other duties include naming the heads of the prosecution and the security services as well as the regional governors, and he also strongly influences the formal appointment of judges. Despite the Ukrainian president's main focus on foreign policy, however, foreign and domestic policy have, in fact, been very much two sides of the same coin since the Euromaidan. For, Ukraine clearly defined European integration as its vector of foreign policy after the Euromaidan, and this immediately translated into a specific set of domestic policies: It brought on an agenda of political and socio-economic

reforms that is intended eventually to bring society closer to European norms and standards of living.

The possible impact of the new presidency can, finally, only be seen in connection with the upcoming parliamentary election, as the deep transformation into a consolidated European democracy requires a strong partnership between the president and the parliament. At which pace the domestic change that Ukrainians voted for this Sunday can progress will depend on the outcome of the parliamentary polls: They will determine which parties will make it to parliament and how strong the support for Zelenskiy's own Servant of the People party will be.

Zelenskiy's Victory: The Key Determinants

Zelenskiy's victory is a breakthrough for the post-Soviet space where political systems have mostly been too rigid to allow candidates from outside the political establishment to position themselves that high in the political echelons. It is usually only in periods of social upheavals or crises when such openings occur for political newcomers. As a result, one might have assumed that, five years after the Euromaidan, the momentum for such an opportunity had passed. However, a few factors explain Zelenskiy's victory.

First, the context of fatigue and disillusionment with the pace of domestic reforms played in Zelenskiy's favor. The 2013-2014 Revolution of Dignity brought into power a new leadership which promised to turn into reality the high expectations that followed the Euromaidan. The leadership under outgoing President Petro Poroshenko has genuinely achieved remarkable goals, such as the negotiated Ukraine-European Union Association Agreement, the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement with the EU, and a visa-free regime with the EU. Poroshenko also managed to create a strong international circle of friends who have been willing to stand for Ukraine's territorial integrity and democratic transformation.

However, Poroshenko's achievements in foreign policy have not been matched by major domestic advances. For the past five years, Ukrainians have been struggling with the socioeconomic consequences of a country torn by war, widespread corruption, and frustration over the lack of qualitative improvements to their lives. Many feel betrayed by how the government has been delivering on the reform agenda. According to a recent poll by the Rating Group Ukraine on behalf of the International Republican Institute (IRI), 70 percent of Ukrainians are dissatisfied with the direction their country has taken. The outcome of the presidential election is, therefore, one of protest and punishment: Ukrainians did not cast their ballots for

but rather *against* someone – in this case, the Ukrainian political establishment.

Second, by voting for a 'new face', Ukrainians expressed their longing for a new kind of politics and a new style of leadership. Paradoxically, however, Zelenskiy is a 'new face' that every Ukrainian already knows. In a popular TV series, *The Servant of the People*, he plays a humble and honest school teacher, Vasyl Holoborodko, who unexpectedly becomes president. During his term in office, his character fights against the intrinsic corruption within the Ukrainian political system. This idealized, integrative leadership style is what Ukrainians wish for. That Zelenskiy's actual policy content and leadership style are big unknowns has, in this context, actually played to his advantage. It provided a content vacuum which allowed idealistic projections rather than providing a possibly disappointing realistic agenda. The blurred separation between fiction and reality contributed to an image transfer: Many Ukrainians cast their votes for who they want to see in Zelenskiy – the fictional teacher-turned-president Holoborodko.

Third, the campaign costs for Zelenskiy were not as high as for a regular newcomer as his media access gave him a jump-start compared to others who tried their odds in this election. New politicians usually find it very difficult to join high-level politics due to the increasing costs of campaigning. Access to the media is crucial as political advertising is a key cost in Ukrainian elections. The medium of television is of particular importance, as it still presents the most widely used and trusted source of news for Ukrainians, according to a 2018 survey on media consumption, carried out by Internews on behalf of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). With his popular screen presence, Zelenskiy had a significant and double advantage in this regard: He was not only known to most Ukrainians via the television comedy that he authored and produced for more than 15 years. Due to the positive connotation of his TV character, he also had direct access to their hearts.

Fourth, no other candidate until this election used social media as actively and effectively as Zelenskiy did. Through his skillful political messaging, Zelenskiy appealed especially to younger Ukrainians who tend to be politically apathetic as they are unable to identify candidates who represent their interests. Zelenskiy's social media presence pressed his contenders also to increase their social media engagement and pushed the electoral campaign to new digital heights. Despite the overall increase, however, there were marked differences in the quality of the social media usage. While Zelenskiy achieved an easy nonchalant style on Instagram, President Poroshenko's

framing of political messages was much more formal, and appeared stiff and less appealing to Ukraine's younger generation.

In summary, Zelenskiy managed not only to aggregate the societal discontent that had accumulated under Poroshenko's rule during the past five years. He also managed to embody Ukrainians' hopes for a fairer Ukraine. These were infused partly by Zelenskiy's fictional presence on television, which also put him at a financial advantage given the high costs of campaigning. And finally, he managed to rally Ukraine's youth by meeting and addressing them in the space and style they most frequent, i.e. social media. Sunday's vote was one of rupture with the old and a call for change.

Sustaining Success: Zelenskiy's Challenges

Following his landslide victory, Zelenskiy will have to sustain his success, and several factors will determine his impact in this regard. Domestically, it is the extent to which he will manage to turn the period until the autumn parliamentary election to his advantage. As an outsider, he currently holds no political support in parliament, and it is also unclear whether and how his team will manage to maintain the momentum for his Servant of the People party until the polls. It is the parliamentary election which will, above all, determine the strength and political support for Zelenskiy's future actions as president.

Moreover, by now there are clear indications that Zelenskiy and his campaign team have ties to Ukrainian oligarch Ihor Kolomoisky, who suffered significant economic setbacks during Poroshenko's presidency. It is not completely known yet to what extent this will result in dependencies for Zelenskiy. The degree of his entanglement will determine with how much independence he will be able to exert his mandate. This will be crucial for his ability to meet citizens' expectations that the president decouple business interests from politics and move the reform agenda forward at the expense of entrenched, vested interests.

A significant challenge also lies on the foreign policy front: In light of an ongoing war with a neighbor who has significantly stronger bargaining power, the political novice Zelenskiy will have to quickly build confidence and a strong rapport with the West. Many Western governments have already congratulated Zelenskiy on his victory and expressed continued support for Ukraine. Now, he needs to present himself as a credible and reliable partner to gain the trust of European governments, as President Poroshenko did during his incumbency. Despite the European Union's positive first signals, this goal does

not come without challenges: Given numerous competing challenges faced by the EU, Ukraine is frequently overlooked today. It will be on Zelenskiy's shoulders to get a front seat for Ukraine on the European agenda again.

The View from the West: Uncertainty and Expectations

The international community, in turn, faces a significant level of uncertainty and, as a result, risk when it comes to Zelenskiy. As a newcomer to politics, he is not only inexperienced but has also been a dark horse throughout the entire presidential race. He skillfully avoided content-related encounters such as interviews, debates, and meetings with journalists. Furthermore, he limited his interactions with foreign institutions. He has not yet clearly explained his agenda on key policy issues. Nor has he shared the names he considers for nominations and appointments for key state positions in his purview. This uncertainty, particularly regarding defense and security – key policies in the president's mandate –, raises serious concerns among the international community, especially given that Ukraine is at war and has had its territorial integrity repeatedly violated in the past five years. Ukraine's difficult reform process is, furthermore, heavily underpinned by international financial assistance. In this regard, too, it is key for international partners to be assured that the president-elect stands for continuity in Ukraine's domestic reforms and foreign policy agenda.

Consolidating Ukraine's democracy is also crucial to preserving its sovereignty. While Zelenskiy could be regarded a risk and there are plenty of reasons to be cautious, there is much at stake after the election – not only for the West but, first and foremost, for Ukraine itself. Given the ongoing stand-off with Russia, the ultimate goal which Ukraine may have to pay, if it shows more signs of democratic backsliding rather than progress, is its territorial integrity, if not its sovereignty at large. Russian propaganda has already been exploiting Ukraine's domestic vulnerabilities to portray it as a failed state and thereby seed doubt among Western partners. To counter such efforts, Zelenskiy has repeatedly expressed his commitment to strengthen the rule of law and end the war in Donbas. The shared strong interest to maintain Ukraine's stability and integrity could offer an opportunity and new momentum also for Brussels and Berlin to recommit to a fresh re-start for Ukraine.

Not engaging with the new president-elect is certainly not an option for the EU: This would send a wider signal that Brussels withdraws support from young democracies in its Eastern neighborhood at a time when they are

constantly bullied by the Kremlin in their frail exercise of freedom and democracy. The result would be a more hawkish Russia willing to reassert its political dominance not only over Ukraine but over the entire post-Soviet space. The EU would face increasing instability at its Eastern border.

An Ambivalent Neighbor for Russia: Challenges and Chances

While Zelenskiy's presidency could be an opportunity for the EU and Germany to inject new progress on Donbas and the stalled structural reforms, he could become a growing problem for Russia. As a new and young charismatic leader, elected in a free and highly competitive vote and vowing to focus on ordinary Ukrainians' domestic issues, Zelenskiy stands in stark contrast to Vladimir Putin's leadership at home. If Zelenskiy manages to deliver on citizens' expectations and to build parliamentary support, this contrast might become even more aggravating for the Russian government; it would provide an alternative discourse to what the Kremlin promotes about Ukraine via its state-controlled media channels. When it comes to the war in Donbas, however, Zelenskiy's inexperience plays to Russia's advantage as political acumen is key to any conflict resolution. At this stage, therefore, Russia

regards the newcomer with ambivalence: It is noteworthy that, while many Russian political figures have indirectly commented on the election result, Zelenskiy has not yet been officially congratulated on his victory.

What Zelenskiy's victory ultimately shows is that civil society can fight back and punish its corrupt elites in post-Soviet states. It is not afraid to take on the risk of electing the politically inexperienced. Most of the determinants that pushed Zelenskiy upwards and toward his victory are present in other countries in the region as well: Low legitimacy of incumbents, high distrust in state institutions, widespread discontent with corrupt elites and stalled reform processes, a demand for new faces in politics, and an increased usage of social media to frame and deliver appealing political messages – all of these factors may bring more unexpected changes to the region. The EU needs to consider these underlying trends in order to strengthen its Eastern policy towards the region.

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